

JANET

J. D. Daubs

From *Time* magazine, "Milestones" column, October 1978:

DIED. Janet Flanner, 86, the New Yorker's Gênet whose "Letter from Paris" was a feature of the magazine from 1925 to 1975; of pneumonia; in New York

I suppose she had to die sometime, but I never really expected to see it. I also know that someday the Arc de Triomphe will crumble, but if I'm still around I don't want to be told about it. I want to remember it as I saw it last, in the summer of 1975, the year in which Janet Flanner penned her last "Letter from Paris."

So many things I had planned to do for her! Not least among them the writing of an article to be published in this town which produced her, an article which would say to them, "See!? See what your native daughter has done! She has left you and has gone to Paris and has known Malraux, Gide, DeGaulle, Gertrude Stein! And I'll bet you never even knew it." Indeed, they hadn't. The *Indianapolis Star* devoted one corner of the obituary page to her death, tagged with the headline: "FORMER HOOSIER FLANNER DIES."

It was a very personal grief I felt that day. To mention it to anyone would be to elicit that doe-eyed "Who?" with which people so enjoy hurting one's feelings; on balance, I suppose they had no reason to know who she was. She had never been anything to them. To me she was a great lady. I spent the day in bookish, not uncomfortable sadness.

I remembered a letter that had, as if by conjury, appeared in a mailbox in a tired little town on a grimy summer day. This letter was a reply to a long, disjointed (but well-typed) epistle sent by a thirteen-year-old boy to the famous writer after he had seen her on television. His letter had been desperate; he hadn't known really what he wanted from her, except something—oh, please God! something!—from a world which had disappeared without telling him.

The reply was not a form letter, it was handwritten in green ink, and it was gracious. It told the boy that yes, the Twenties had been a marvellous age, but there had been many others. Why not go back fifty years to the time of Balzac? Never, she said, read anything because you think you *should* or because it happens to be popular at the time. He couldn't believe it. She had written to him, and he could share it with no one. Not for years would he meet anyone who would understand. . . .

In the autumn of 1978 that same boy had turned twenty, and had somewhere along the way metamorphosed into me; I felt, on that day that she died, the same void, the same inability to express myself as I had when I had received the letter from her years before. Never would I be able, I felt, to put it all together and have anyone know what I'm talking about. But I have done so here, and the effect is as incoherent on paper as it was in fact.

